

California Conservation Corps

Newsletter

Winter 2003

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Photo: James Roe



CCC crews at work against Exotic Newcastle Disease.

CCC Crews Deployed to Battle Deadly Bird Disease

By Merrold Young, CCC Corpsmember Development

Clad head-to-toe in white Tyvek coveralls, gloves, dust masks and protective glasses, more than 200 corpsmembers converged on Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino neighborhoods to help combat the spread of Exotic Newcastle Disease, a disease which could prove fatal to many species of birds.

Responding to yet another call for help, the CCC jumped into high gear, assisting the California Department of Food and Agriculture and the United States Department of Agriculture in their efforts to keep the disease from spreading.

For 26 years, the CCC's emergency response forces have battled statewide emergencies, such as floods, fires, earthquakes and other types of emergencies, including the current fight against Newcastle Disease.

Since October, CDFA and USDA staff have surveyed sites, followed up on hot-line calls for visual surveillance and tested birds for signs of sickness. Depopulation teams visit neighborhoods where birds have been diagnosed with the disease. Then, CCC crews step in, and under the guidance of federal technicians, they dismantle and remove coops, cages, fencing, and other structures which may have housed infected birds. As CCC crews move to the next site, USDA teams follow behind, spraying surfaces to kill any trace of the disease. Crews work 12-hour shifts for about two weeks before being relieved by a fresh crew.

"I feel like we've accomplished a lot," said Chico crewleader Mieka Hull, "But there's much more to do. We've all learned a lot about the area and the people here." Hull noted that many bird owners readily accepted crews working on their premises, some offering milk, cookies and even tamales.

Crew Supervisor Kurt Delfino, Hull's supervisor, was touched by his crew's emotional response and compassion toward the affected bird owners. "There have been tears from people losing their pets," he said. "Corpsmembers had to be more compassionate than on your typical project."

Norwalk Center corpsmember Michael Cordero applauded his crew's teamwork. "It's been a learning experience with us all working together to stop the disease," he said. "I really believe the community appreciates what we are doing. They thank us and help identify areas to clean next. They see the benefit of our work."

Up to 21 crews have been working this emergency at any given time. Crews have been dispatched from throughout the CCC, including from as far away as Klamath. The Corps has taken on increasing responsibility in recent weeks.

"We had no command staff before the end of November," said Scot Schmier, assistant emergency manager. "I pulled together a command team and brought in more crews. The daily numbers don't compare to Medfly in the '80s but it could surpass that in total hours worked if this goes on until June as some predict."



Message from the Director

Welcome to the first issue of the California Conservation Corps' external newsletter. Through publication of this newsletter, we hope to introduce the CCC to those of you who may not be too familiar with the Corps and say hello to those of you who may know of our work to benefit California's young people, environment and communities. We intend to publish this quarterly newsletter in an effort to highlight the various public-benefit projects that our corpsmembers have completed, perhaps in your community.

First of all, you may have seen news coverage of our CCC crews on two emergency response fronts in California in recent months. Some 21 CCC crews, or more than 200 corpsmembers, have been assisting state and federal agencies in the effort in Southern California to eradicate Exotic Newcastle Disease, a deadly disease that affects poultry and small birds. (See story on page 1) Secondly, CCC corpsmembers have been working with agriculture officials in San Diego County to contain a Mexican fruit fly infestation that threatens citrus crops in the area. The spread of the disease and the pest infestation could have a devastating effect on California's already ailing economy.

Furthermore, CCC crews are geared up to respond to floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters. In our 26-year history, the Corps has battled wildfires, oil spills, pest infestations, including the Medfly and the glassy-winged sharpshooter, and assisted in search and rescues, earthquake recovery and drought-related projects. Our crews played a huge role during the energy crisis with the PowerWalk, the distribution of energy-efficient light bulbs to working-class neighborhoods statewide. The PowerWalk helped Californians keep the lights on. Altogether, CCC crews have devoted millions of hours to emergency response assistance.

When not out working emergencies, our young men and women focus on natural resource projects and other assignments that help California communities, from Klamath on the North Coast to the U.S.-Mexican border. Crews build and restore backcountry trails in the state's wilderness areas and construct disabled-access boardwalks and playgrounds up and down the state. In Humboldt County, corpsmembers visit elementary school classrooms to educate youngsters about dental health care.

Last year, the federal Environmental Protection Agency recognized the Corps' Fortuna Center as a champion of the environment for its recycling program. In Fresno, law enforcement officials lauded CCC corpsmembers and staff for coming to the rescue of three Porterville schoolgirls who were buried alive when a gravel pit collapsed around them. In San Luis Obispo, CCC crews helped unearth original stonework built by the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s that had been buried at Morro Bay State Park for decades.

As you can see, the Corps contributes to California communities in many and varied ways. Perhaps our biggest and most important contribution is our mission to improve the lives and job prospects of California's young people. During their stay in the Corps, corpsmembers have the opportunity to develop job skills, learn a trade, develop a solid work ethic, continue with their education and understand the value of community service. They acquire skills that will help them for the rest of their lives. That's what the Corps is all about. I look forward to sharing more news about the CCC in future issues of this new newsletter. This is just a beginning.





My Meeting with the President of the United States

By Malikah Rashied, Corpsmember - Delta Center

In August, I had a once-in-a-lifetime chance to meet the President of the United States. The plan called for me to be at the airport in Stockton at 8:30 a.m. to greet President George W. Bush as he exited Air Force One during a campaign stop. I waited nervously with others who were also selected to meet the president.

When the moment came to meet President Bush, we lined up outside the airport. When the plane finally touched down, I became somewhat emotional and a little overwhelmed to think that the president of the United States was actually in it. I waited anxiously for the president to exit the plane. When I saw him I became a little nervous and excited at the thought of shaking his hand. I wondered what I would say. Then he came down the stairs.

He started greeting the people in line and then came over to me. He said, "Hello, Malikah. How are you doing?" I told him I was doing fine. He asked, "Are you enjoying the CCC?" I told him that I was, and then I said, "It's an honor to meet you." He told me it was a pleasure to meet me. He asked me what I did in the CCC and I told him about my work on fire prevention and my volunteer work. As he left to get in his car he turned and waved at me.

I was then led to a van in the presidential motorcade. Everything was happening quickly. Administration folks were scrambling to get everyone in their cars. It was a long line of cars. It was at this point that I realized how important the president's visit was to the community. People lined the streets to the auditorium where the president was to speak. I couldn't believe that I was a part of it all. I waved at all the people who came out to see the motorcade. It was very exciting.

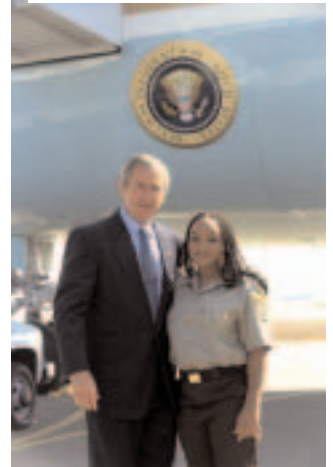
When we reached the auditorium, I noticed all the Secret Service agents running around protecting the president. The people on the street were trying to get through to see him. We hurried through the doors and into the building. They took us to our seats and there I joined Corpsmember Development Supervisor Nancy Cook.

When President Bush entered, everyone clapped for a very long time. The crowd stood up and I noticed that the president was smiling a genuine smile and seemed to appreciate our welcome. President Bush thanked the crowd and told a few jokes which the audience liked. Then, he mentioned my name and the fact that I worked for the California Conservation Corps. He thanked me for my work on fire prevention in the forests and for the volunteer work I had done in my community. He then asked where I was and I stood up and waved to him. This made me feel important because he pointed me out to the audience and said he appreciated my work in the CCC.

Throughout the day, I felt I was in the middle of something very important and it made me feel like "somebody." I was around all of these important people and it was like a "too-good-to-be-true" story. I realize now that it is not so hard to talk in front of people. I was interviewed twice at work by a newspaper and television crew and I was interviewed on the street three times. Each time it became easier for me to talk about myself and what I have accomplished in my life.

I know that this is an experience that only happens to a few of us in a lifetime and the chance of meeting someone else with this story to tell will be slim. I owe this experience to the California Conservation Corps. It was a privilege to represent all of the corpsmembers in the CCC and an honor to meet the president. I don't know why this happened to me and not to one of my co-workers in the Corps. I guess I was in the right place at the right time...the CCC!

Photo: Courtesy of the White House



Malikah enjoyed her meeting with President Bush.



Former Sequoia Corpsmember Living His Dream

As a youngster, George Perez chased fire trucks as they raced through the streets of his hometown of Kerman in the Central Valley. As he grew older, he continued to chase his boyhood dream of becoming a firefighter, and graduated from Merced Community College with an A.A. degree in Fire Technology.

But Perez found that becoming a firefighter required a lot more than a dream and a degree. He applied to dozens of fire departments across the state, but found that he was competing with thousands of applicants for a handful of positions. His applications came back time and time again, accompanied by rejection letters. Those letters often reduced him to tears.

"It would have been real easy for me to quit, to just throw my dream aside," he said. "But I learned from my mother and the California Conservation Corps that life's not always going to be easy. You have to work for what you want. Those rejection letters only made the fire inside of me burn that much stronger."

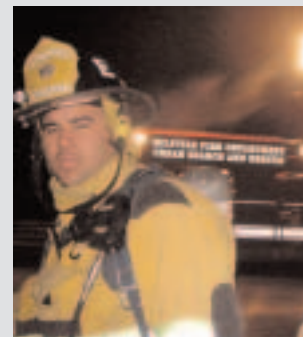
Perez's refusal to quit paid off. One day four years ago, he received yet another letter, this one from the City of Milpitas. When it arrived, he handed the letter to his mother Karen Velarde. "We would like to offer you a position as a firefighter...," the letter began.

"My mom smiled and said, 'I told you so,'" Perez, 26, recalls. "She was my biggest supporter through all those rejection letters. She kept telling me that eventually I would get in."

She was right. As a firefighter for the Milpitas Fire Department, Perez is living his dream. "In the fire service, every day is different than the day before," he said. "Family is also equally important to me. Inside the fire house, we really are a close-knit family. The guys up here, I consider them some of my best friends."

Perez's first shot at fighting fires came as a corpsmember in the California Conservation Corps. He joined a fire crew in the CCC's Sequoia District in Fresno. The work was difficult. "It was an eye-opening experience," Perez said. "It was definitely a challenge. I was brought up with a good work ethic, but the Corps made it even better. It was a lot of hard work and the living conditions were pretty tough when we were out on projects."

Perez's biggest break in pursuit of his firefighting dream came during a work assignment in the Bay Area. Through CCC contacts, Perez learned about a firefighter internship in the Milpitas Fire Department. He applied for the position and prevailed. He has been with the Milpitas Fire Department for four years. Perez said his days in the Corps taught him many important lessons. "Today, I tell corpsmembers to follow their dreams, to never let anyone tell them that they're not good enough or not smart enough."



George Perez on assignment.

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Schmier noted that not only were CCC crews performing the labor, but were now also helping to coordinate future work and track accomplishments.

"Just because we are dealing with chickens, and not floods or fires, doesn't make it any less of an emergency," he said. "There are significant economic impacts that could devastate California's economy."

Emergency Manager Jose Phillips had high praise for the staff and corpsmembers assigned to the clean up. "This has served as a benchmark with respect to how viable an emergency response resource we are," he said. "I'm very happy with how my staff has grown into their positions. Not only are we cleaning sites, but we're being asked to provide corpsmembers to enter data and dispose of dead animals. We've helped provide organizational expertise in handling supplies, something we've done extensively at fires. I've talked to USDA people who are interested in having us work in other states and I can see us acting as advisors in the future. Being here has truly broadened our resume."

Photo: Diane Brown



Shasta Cascade Crew 21 on the job.



Muir School Gives Corpsmembers Shot at High School Diploma

Teacher Teri Finklea moved confidently from student to student in a bustling John Muir Charter School classroom at the California Conservation Corps' Delta Center in Stockton. She worked individually with each student and it became abundantly clear that they appreciated the one-on-one interaction with the woman they fondly describe as teacher, mentor and cheerleader. The students feel exactly the same about teacher assistant Bonnie Macy.

"These teachers are great," said Aaron Sefton, a corpsmember and recent Muir School graduate. "They were very patient with me. They are very supportive and encouraging."

John Muir Charter School operates at nearly every CCC district in the state, with the Nevada County Office of Education serving as the chartering agency. The school has 50 certificated and 10 non-certificated teachers.

"This job is very challenging, but I wouldn't trade it for anything," Finklea said. "We get a wide range of students. Many of them struggled for whatever reasons in traditional schools. I try a different approach with each one to find what works best for them. I work hard to get them to believe that they can set and accomplish goals."



Corpsmembers in class after a day's work..

In addition to CCC corpsmembers, the school also serves Local Corps, Job Corps and Youth Build students. In four years of operation, 700-750 students have obtained high school diplomas while in the Corps.

"We offer multiple routes to get the students through their high school requirements," said Muir School Principal Don Brice. "First, student and teacher meet and agree which route is the most appropriate route for the student. A lot of the CCC project work is incorporated into the educational curriculum. We work with students to enhance the learning that goes on out on the grade."

Enrollment through last October reached 813 students. "Students will have been in high school for varying degrees of time, some almost all the way through high school, and some not at all," Brice said. "The curriculum is tailored to allow them to graduate from high school and meet all the necessary requirements to do so."

Some graduates enroll in community college and some enlist in the military. Others opt for vocational schools or four-year institutions. "It's been very cool," Brice said. "Some students get into unions and work as carpenters, masons, etc., based on the training they received in the CCC. Because they obtained high school diplomas, they can get into various professions, such as fire training with the Department of Forestry and other agencies."

The students' scholastic success depends on their abilities and how long they stay in the Corps. Muir offers year-round and summer school. Students study reading, writing, mathematics, English, social studies, history and other typical high school subjects. If a corpsmember transfers to another CCC center, their education plan moves with them.

"Every student has something valuable to offer," Macy said. "I try to find out what 'sparks' them. In the Muir classroom, we attempt to energize and motivate our students and we give them the respect that they deserve as they work toward their high school diplomas. I love that our students are enthusiastic about their education."

For students who are 18 years or older, Muir School offers a last chance for a regular high school diploma, otherwise they would have to attend adult schools. "They now recognize the value of it," Brice said. "A lot of students don't see the value of a high school diploma until they're a little older. Now that they're older, they see that they can come back and get their diploma and it allows them to move on to other things. With an integrated educational plan, corpsmembers begin to see that they can accomplish their high school diploma, which many felt would never happen."



Teacher Teri Finklea helped a corpsmember with her lessons.



CCC and Morro Bay Partnership Protects Watershed

Corpsmember Renee Rogers goes to school every day in the sand dunes, salt marshes and wetlands of Morro Bay. Her textbooks are its eelgrass beds, freshwater ponds and oak woodlands.

Renee wouldn't have it any other way. As a corpsmember in the California Conservation Corps, she puts into action her strong desire to protect Earth's natural resources.

"My grandfather used to talk to me all the time about taking care of the Earth and protecting our environment," the 22 year-old said. "He had a real love for the planet and the environment. I guess I picked up a lot of my love of nature from him."

Through the CCC and Morro Bay National Estuary Program partnership, Renee has the opportunity to do her part to help the environment and develop job skills along the way. "We've had classes on all sorts of things like riparian zones, wetlands, salt marshes and land and water uses," she said. "I find it all incredibly fascinating."

Photo: Bobby Jo Close



Paul Corsi conducts survey.

Renee's corpsmember colleagues and staff from the CCC's Los Padres Center have helped the Corps establish itself as the workhorse of the environmental community in the San Luis Obispo area. CCC crews have been involved in the effort to preserve Morro Bay and its watershed for many years.

"We have a very strong relationship with environmental agencies in our area," said CCC Conservation Supervisor Bruce Bonifas. "Many of those agencies look to us to get the work done."

Photo: Meredith Hardy



Los Padres watershed crew at Pennington Creek.

Because of those ties, the CCC was asked to participate in the development of the Morro Bay National Estuary's Comprehensive Management Plan. The plan strives to protect, enhance and restore Morro Bay's natural resources and watersheds. It is one of 28 national estuary programs that seek to protect precious coastal areas.

"The number one issue within the watershed is sedimentation," Bonifas said. "Along with natural erosion, poor land-use practices in the watershed have exacerbated the rate of sedimentation deposited into the bay. It's turning Morro Bay into more of a delta and meadow, rather than an estuary."

CCC staff helped decide issues the estuary needed to address, Bonifas continued. "There's wildlife habitat protection, enhancement of riparian zones, landowner outreach and incorporation of agricultural use to consider. We had to figure out how to bring everybody to the table to pony up to protect our watershed."

The Morro Bay Watershed encompasses the bay itself, Chorro and Los Osos creeks and several tributaries, as well as two mountain ranges and their valleys. The CCC employs a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Data Collection Program to chart the entire watershed. Through an EPA grant, GIS crews are engaged in a comprehensive wetlands mapping project, under the supervision of the CCC's GIS Crew Supervisor Bobby Jo Close. The work includes habitat mapping and assessment and eel grass surveys.

"Starting at the mouth of the creek, the crews work their way to the headwaters mapping various conditions of the stream corridor," Close said. "They measure every habitat unit, every pool, every ripple, and every part of the creek."

The GIS crew is also working with the EPA, the Coastal Commission and the Army Corps of Engineers to identify and map plant species in the salt marsh. In addition to mapping out habitats and gathering other data, crews recently worked on a steelhead habitat restoration project on Pennington Creek. They built willow mattresses to stabilize the bank while planting trees to reestablish riparian vegetation. They also installed wing deflectors and rock structures to create deeper pools at the bottom of the creek channel where steelhead trout can live year round. The Department of Fish and Game Restoration Grants Program funded the habitat restoration project.

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A Solid Foundation for CCC Corpsmembers

The founders of the California Conservation Corps Foundation had one goal in mind when they created the non-profit organization back in 1988: take care of the young men and women who do so much to help California's environment and communities.

"The CCC Foundation was created to support corpsmember activities," said Cindy Laubacher, chairwoman of the CCC Foundation Board of Directors. "We fund activities and provide materials and other supplies that are beneficial to the corpsmembers and the Corps, especially those activities that otherwise wouldn't happen due to lack of funding. Our sole motivation is to help young adults find their way."

The idea for the Foundation originated in the 1980s with former Director Bud Sheble, after the CCC's Community Advisory Boards sought a mechanism for tax-deductible contributions related to corpsmember development. Sheble talked with Governor George Deukmejian about the Foundation concept and, with the Governor's blessing, went on to establish it. Sheble invited B.T. Collins to serve on the original board, and Collins continued as a member until his death. Al Aramburu, also a former CCC Director, revitalized the Foundation during his tenure as CCC director and continues to serve on the board today.

"We all know the CCC's motto about hard work and miserable conditions," Aramburu said. "It is especially important to help the Corps and corpsmembers right now, when the state budget situation is so dire. There never seems to be enough money to do the things that need to be done. The Foundation has been pretty successful, but we would like to do more. We really care about the holistic development of corpsmembers."

The Foundation's Executive Director Susan DeMars said all members of the Board are driven by the desire to help corpsmembers and the environment. "We have assembled a pretty diverse Board of Directors," she said. "We have people such as Al who gained a deep passion for the CCC during his service as director. We also have a professor who was a personal friend of B.T. Collins who wants to further B.T.'s work. We have board members who are interested in conservation and youth development. The underlining fact is that we all believe in the CCC and the good work that it does. It isn't just a state agency; it does many good things to help young people and the environment and that's what drives us all."

John Duncan, Doug Martin, Dr. Barbara O'Connor, Kevin O'Rourke, Bobby Pena, Thomas Riley, Scott Rose and Steve Swatt serve on the Foundation's board, along with Aramburu, Laubacher and DeMars. The board reviews fund-raising goals and strategies, identifies prospective projects and considers funding requests from the Corps.

The Foundation hopes to generate funds and find ways to help in the continuing effort to improve health care benefits for corpsmembers and also strives to provide educational materials and stipends. In the past, the

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One of the most important aspects of the CCC's involvement in the Estuary Program is the educational component it provides for corpsmembers. "We obtained a grant from the Estuary Program to fund a consultant, who developed a watershed curriculum specific to Morro Bay," said Phil LaFollette, Conservationist 2. "This way, corpsmembers can learn about hydro-morphology, geology, sedimentation, steelhead biology and other natural and man-made processes that affect the watershed."

Corpsmembers must pass several competency tests and work on various aspects of the project before they can receive certificates. Crew Supervisor Bill Nolan and his crew worked on the Pennington Creek project. "The corpsmembers involved in this project saw it from the very beginning to where it is now," Nolan said. "The willows are actually growing. They can start to see water flowing and fish down in the pools. The learning part of it was more than I anticipated or expected. They grasped the learning end of it very well."



Photo: Meredith Hardy

Los Padres crew learns about habitat mapping.



HowTo Reach Us ...

To join the Corps, call
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To have the CCC work for
your agency, call the
project coordinator at the
center nearest you, or one
of the five district offices:

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Mel Krebs
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Northern Inland Service District

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Foundation has sponsored job preparedness workshops for corpsmembers that help them learn and practice proper interview techniques to help them in their quest for jobs once they leave the Corps. The Foundation also sponsors an annual CCC calendar distributed to the Legislature. "The calendar is important because legislators oversee the budget," DeMars said. "It reminds them of the importance and tremendous value of the CCC."

The Foundation also works to secure grants. The Foundation obtained several key grants, including one from the Packard Foundation, used to complete watershed restoration projects on the Central Coast, and one from Trimble Navigation to establish a Global Positioning System crew. All the grant funds are used to further enhance the corpsmember experience.

In addition, the Foundation sponsors the CCC's annual Unity Games, which give corpsmembers an opportunity to meet their counterparts from across the state for a weekend of friendly competition, camaraderie and fun. The Foundation also contributes to other important events, including the CCC's 25th anniversary celebrations in 2001. Most recently, the Foundation offered to match CCC staff contributions for a holiday gift campaign for corpsmembers, who earn minimum wage.

"The Foundation is here to complement the experience of corpsmembers in the CCC," DeMars said. "We feel it's important because we truly believe in the Corps and its mission to provide opportunities for young adults to develop a good work ethic, job skills and at the same time work to preserve California's environment."

Editor's Note: To receive future copies of the CCC's quarterly external newsletter, please send your name and street address to the California Conservation Corps, Public Information Office, 1719 24th Street, Sacto., CA 95816.